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ABSTRACT

The two reports combined here examine process consultancy in the summer school program of the Open University in England. The first report presents an enquiry into relationships in summer schools, conducted through a role of process consultancy, that addressed: (1) anxieties at the inter-group level; and (2) relationships between students and staff in separate courses, between staff from different departments and/or staff physically separated in different locations, and between full-time and part-time staff. The report reveals how anxieties may affect staff and teacher-learner relationships, especially when considering issues of gender, generation, and age. It is noted that when anxieties about authority and dependence are focused on an internal consultant, the further progress of such enquiries can become difficult. The second report summarizes a study of a small group of Open University students, as well as a few tutors, who were interviewed before, during, and after their first summer school term to find out what impact the summer school experience had on them. Selections from the transcripts are included and discussed. Difficulties involved in opening up further discussions about enquiries related to separate parts of the institution are also considered. (GLR)

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Summer schools: individual and institutional learning

Report No 67

A consultancy in summer schools

Report No 68

Teaching and Consultancy Centre

by Robert Nicodemus

1992

Institute of Educational Technology
The Open University, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA

The Open University

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The Open University

The **Teaching and Consultancy Centre** is part of the Open University's Institute of Educational Technology.

Its aims are:

1. **To help improve student learning** in the University by advising and assisting Faculties, Schools, Continuing Education, University Committees and groups, as appropriate. A chief concern is the accessibility and teaching effectiveness of course materials, to which the Centre contributes through its work on course teams: through research; course planning, policy making and working methods; critical reading of draft materials, and the evaluation of courses.

2. To maintain a knowledge base for the above activities by helping to research problems in the OU learning system and by recording experience in course teams and on committees, and also to encourage innovatory solutions and practices.

3. To provide consultancy and training, inside the OU and on a contract basis with outside organisations, based on the staff's wide experience in distance education and open learning. On this same basis, to chair course teams and write course materials, and to 'transform' materials produced by external contributors into high quality distance teaching material.

FOREWORD

A small group of OU students were interviewed before, during and after their first summer school to find out the impact of summer schoools on them. A few tutors were also interviewed. Selections from the transcripts are included and discussed. Difficulties opening up further discussions about enquiries related to separate parts of the institution are also considered.

SUMMER SCHOOLS: INDIVIDUAL AND INSTITUTIONAL LEARNING

Introduction

In February 1984 a small group of three OU senior counsellors (Sudipa, Nick, Gill), based in the regional offices, and a lecturer (Robert) based in IET (Institute of Educational Technology) at the OU's centre (Milton Keynes) developed a proposal to enquire into student's experiences of summer school through three interviews - before, during and after their first residential weeks. In this report I describe how I became interested in this project, our experiences over the year it took to complete it and what we found out.

Background

My own interest in enquiring into the the impact of a distance teaching environment on staff originated in an enquiry by consultants from the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (TIHR) in 1978 - 1979. Within one year of the end of the TIHR enquiry, I began to work with course teams on how dynamics in relationships, especially at an unconscious level, affected work. Informal discussions with staff led to a 1983 consultancy into summer schools and contact with OU senior counsellors, the one group most interested in the impact of the institution on students, their study as well as personal lives. By the end of 1983 a small group of us were discussing how we might conduct an in depth study of a few students and their experiences of summer school.

This enquiry furthered our interests in the importance of emotions in learning and development, how to use evidence from one's own feelings as part of any enquiry. The particular focus and cooperation between staff based in different parts of the OU may represent an effort to integrate what may become separated in a large complex institutions i.e. a) staff with complimentary interests and b) two aspects of experience which are also complimentary to learning - ideas which may be conveyed at a distance through media and emotions which are best explored directly in a relationship.

Outline of the study

In November 1983 I attended an RAS (Regional Academic Services) seminar "Developments in counselling". From contacts established there a small group

of us proposed in February 1984 a research project in summer school. John Martin from the Systems Group, Faculty of Technology commented on our proposal in a memo - "For a long time I have felt that summer school is a potentially hazardous, and largely unsupported, jungle, and as someone with several years experience of psychotherapy, as both client and trainee, including a very remarkable (for me) Tavistock Leicester Conference, I am sympathetic to the idea that we need to look much more carefully at the affective and group process aspects of summer school..." (memo of 8.2.84 to Sudipa, Robert Nicodemus, Nick Baker, Gill Pitt). The four of us were eventually to carry out the enquiry as well as forming a 'Peer Training Course' in March but later it became the 'Peer Support Group' which still meets about five times each year and also sponsors up to three training events each year for staff.

By April we had agreed to interview fifteen students before, during and after their first foundation course in 1984. Additional interviews were also to be conducted by Derek Spruce and John Marshall. My role was to listen to the taped interviews and then organize discussions about them, a task which was to take us seven months to complete between August 1984 and February 1985. Finally, we summarized our results in the form of nine brief statements - 1) Summer school is an experience we do not approach as adults but as we grew up 2) How we are as learners reflects the way we grew up 3) Students' experiences of the OU enables them to fulfil part of their role as a parent, passing on a body of knowledge and developing awareness of one's self image 4) The variance in how students change through summer school, the variance with which they handle it and handled their childhood links back through individuals in summer school and is beyond tutor control. 5) Through summer school students develop insights into the risks of learning and taking responsibility for their own learning 6) Men students find summer schools more difficult to deal with than woman students although the reverse may be true for tutors 7) The reversal of sexual stereotypes in summer schools may be a consequence of bringing fantasies about separate parts of the institution together 8) Everyone brings their perceptions and preconceptions to summer school which they seek to confirm although only students are asked to change 9) An understanding of sexuality connected with power is necessary to understanding learning or not in summer schools.

The problem we worked through together in analyzing the taped interviews made this one of the most rewarding experiences in my eighteen years in the

OU. Each of us had to face the unresolved anxieties which arose in us in response to what the students were telling us, in the interviews as well as in our discussions of them. In the interviews it was sometimes difficult to follow up problems hinted at by what the students did or said. Some of our discussions provoked more anxieties and we realized how important it was that we had come to trust each other through the 'peer support' group. Sudipa wrote -"I am conscious that I feel able not to know and just to offer what I have to offer however little that seems. I trust that you others will accept my ignorance and that we will together have enough between us. It's not new for me to be frank about these things to colleagues but it is new for me to feel totally OK about it - both that I don't have to feel bad about not knowing and not having much to offer, and that I don't have to make some heroic supreme effort to supply more than I have in order for the project to be successful. It's especially new for me to feel that we have enough between us."

Nick, who had read an article I'd written about summer schools in the Sociological Review (1985) wrote - "What struck me most of all was that it was yours. I could hear you saying it! The same thoroughness, sensitivity and care you contributed to our meetings was there. It also helped me make sense of the tapes; it helped me keep clear and contain the sorts of ideas were were getting to in our last meeting - summer school is a re-enactment of how we grew up. Now I could have pursued those issues more if I had the chance to do this work again at summer school"

I was able to fulfil my own task of listening to all the tapes and guiding a discussion about them because I knew that my three colleagues would also help me hold on to and work through the anxieties the interviews had provoked in me. It is not surprising that we found it difficult to write up our results in more detail for possible publication. Getting back into touch with all the emotions when our group disbanded became impossible after two of out group of four left the OU to go into counselling full time (Sudipa and Nick). Later, a part-time tutor, Janet Peacock, joined Gill Pitt and I to present an RAS seminar in June 1986 based on the research. But it had to be cancelled because of lack of support. We were surprised at this because we represented three separate parts of the institution - the centre, the regions and the part-time tutors. We also evidently represented anxieties associated with bringing what is separate together i.e. a movement from persecutory to, the more difficult to contain, depressive anxieties which often precede some creative development.

In September 1987 Sesame (no. 115 p. 6) the OU student newspaper published my article, "Summer school friends", based on the research. I wrote that - "Many students work through their development in summer school in more abstract and symbolic ways, although the mental images may be physically powerful. Worries about the OU or themselves being less than perfect are temporarily suspended by idealisation or denigration until direct experience reveal a much more ambivalent and ambiguous world". There were no responses to this article in contrast to one I wrote later about listening to broadcasts on short wave radio to extend the topics in some courses. My focus on listening at a distance brought over fifty letters of comment and requests for more information. Perhaps making contact from a distance feels safer?

In the following year (1988) Gill Pitt was joined by Chris Saxton and Arlene Young, a counsellor from Athabasca University in Canada to interview students in the Arts Foundation (A102) summer school. Again I was fortunate to be in the position to support Arlene, mainly in helping to debrief or unload the feelings she absorbed each day from her interviews. In June 1991 Gill and Chris offered a seminar based on this work at the London Regional office. They began their report with some quotes from students - "I've been amazed how much I can take in a day", "The feeling that suddenly I am learning and doing something I never thought I would", "I'm on my way to being me". At the beginning students talked about "worrying that they'd all be brainy", "measuring up to others", "feeling an idiot". "if my kids can do it, then so can I". Although summer school was largely a positive experience, afterward some negative aspects were revealed - "felt very lonely now", "thrown into orbit, emotional turmoil", "difficult re-adjusting". In particular, about a third of those interviewed described plunging back into family life as - "difficult finding the personal spaces needed, discontent, depression, bad temper, irritability and impatience".

Staff attendance for the seminar was disappointing because so many interests were not represented, particularly central academics associated with the course. Most were staff from Regional offices who are already aware of and committed to student support. Again, this demonstrates the difficulty of stimulating and sustaining a larger debate in the OU between separate groups of staff in areas where the emotional content may be threatening.

Closure

Bringing an enquiry to a satisfactory conclusion is more difficult when it concerns many different and separate groups. In all our enquiries into student experiences of summer schools the results were not only relevant to many groups, they continued to suggest other needed activities, enquiries and staff training. When we worked as a group of four to analyze the tapes of interviews, there was a strong sense of finishing something that did not require any more time. I had similar feelings about my work in course teams, that it was something completed. I did write some papers which were published and shared some of the results in seminars - the latter a far more satisfying and possibly effective, if not efficient, form of dissemination.

But it is easy to get lost between groups. Gill Pitt told me about taking the results of interviews from the A102 study to a summer school and working with an Arts Staff Tutor to discuss the results and recommendations with tutors, particularly how to finish the week, which had an effect in that instance. But this was only one week on one site. Gill felt some tutors would carry the results to other sites in subsequent years and that eventually they might be taken up in the new Foundation course (A103). But the efforts could be lost through the slow process and protective ownership one feels for their 'baby' - not wanting to expose it to neglect or abuse. Gill and Chris were invited to conduct a staff workshop in another regional office but could not find a mutually free date because of the demands of their regular work. The OU might make more time available for staff to conduct staff development activities if it became a higher priority. But there are considerable ambivalent feelings in the OU about summer schools - some believe it should not be required of students or staff because of those who find the experience very disturbing. In such a climate, overcoming inertia will be doubly difficult.

Details of the interviews

<u>A second chance</u>

For Helen, in her late thirties married with two young children and a baby, OU study was expected to help her live up to the high expectations of her husband's family. She comes very alive through the following extract from the transcript after summer school (we taped the interviews) "I was me, although married

fourteen years and somebody's wife, somebody's mother, suddenly I was me. I was terrified that there wasn't a me, that you could see through me, that I wouldn't have anything to contribute. But I was still a person. I don't think I have ever been away on my own. I felt a different person, years younger-ten or fifteen years. I was tired but not pressed down. Returning home I did get irritable. Shirts weren't ironed. They all had to live with it. The five year old was not delighted. It will take a long time to settle down. There were no repercussions at home. My husband and I argued about some of the ideas but we understand there are two sides. My community is very horrified that I dare say anything. The company chairman's wife just got an OU degree. I'm not going to get stereotyped in a role of just mother, just wife. It is lonely studying at home and the tutorial group is not exciting. I would like to contribute something to life. The effect of my studying on my thirteen year old daughter is good"

Comment

Although this student is clarifying a new sense of her own separate identity, because of her maturity and family support she does not need to deny the possible frustration. But students tend to underestimate the impact of their study on children and spouse, especially going away for a week, as we see in the following example.

Important mothers

Carol is a thirty year old married woman with a twelve year old daughter and two young children. She left school at sixteen, pregnant and married at nineteen. She hoped to complete her OU degree by the time her daughter was nineteen, perhaps so she might be encouraged to take opportunities that she herself missed at that age. After summer school Carol said - " I was glad to have a breathing space, a re-charge in summer school. What a lot of work we did. I enjoyed it but at the end the children were ill for months and I didn't do terribly well in the examinations. The baby had measles, then the girl had bronchitis. It was disappointing having come so far to end poorly... Comparing myself with others in summer school I found I was not as much of a duffer. Others have difficulty too. With a feeling of freedom there I tended not to get tired. In summer school you are not responsible for anyone, not feeding yourself, left to yourself. During that week I came to see my role, that it could be different...It was strange coming home. The children hadn't missed me. It was back to normal,

didn't feel like I'd been away. ..I was surprised the house was tidy. The children were excited the first few days. They were out of the habit of me telling them so they tested a lot more. They were more difficult...When you have been somewhere different you expect change but jobs left to be done were still there. Your body gets on with it while the mind is back in summer school...My husband was tired after a week with the children, if you are not used to it and can't get away...I tried to explain my experiences but he couldn't understand."

Comment

We can see Carol struggling to make sense of her experiences and fit them into some changing perspectives about her life before residential school. She finds it difficult to face the reactions, possibly through illness, of her children. It is obvious that she is giving her daughter an example of what she wished she had done herself but had mixed feelings when her family evidently carried on as normal while she was away. We can also see the difficulty of sharing the experiences with your spouse, even if they are supportive.

Family reactions

In the next example we can see how a family acts out, even more strongly, their anxieties in response to mother leaving for a week. Karen is in her late thirties and married with two teenage children. Her experience returning after summer school were quite different- "Coming home was dreadful. My daughter went out and by 2 am there was panic stations. Funny attitude. My son didn't want to come home. Inconsiderate. My daughter finally rang and wanted me to fetch her and when I objected she slammed the phone down and didn't come home until after 9pm Sunday. When I was at summer school I hadn't worried about them because my husband arranged to have day-shifts...I think I changed a bit in summer school but I was never just a wife and mum. I was intolerant of it. In summer school I felt like a teenager...I came back home with a bump...now I am back where I left off, a general dogs body. My husband doesn't understand. We argued because I was not pleased enough to see him. He didn't want me to go...He would be happier if I go on daily as always. He won't go out with me socially because everyone looks down on him. The others are married to professionals. My husband is boring to talk to, he won't make an effort. My sister is married to a director, my brother has a high powered job. My husband is the poor relation...Summer school is ok if you are single with no responsibilities.

It is awful to pick courses because they don't have summer school. It is more unfair for women, the aggravation of going and coming back."

Comment

For Karen, being a student may have accentuated difficulties already present in the marriage. The increased access afforded by distance education will provide new challenges for a family with longer term consequences than intended by any course of study. Men may not have as much difficulty about going away, as the next example shows, but their high expectations may put other pressures on the family.

Separate but together

Dave is in his late twenties and married with one child. He left school at sixteen and works in a dangerous occupation. He said- "Summer school was great, actually. I really enjoyed it. We worked incredibly hard. It was fun. Even the lectures were good. I enjoyed it, actually, it exceeded my expectations. Everything was great. The social aspect was great...I found it impossible not to speak to everyone. The mix of people was unbelievable. There was this punk girl, she looked great. She had twins. I couldn't imagine it. In any other context we could not have spoken. Summer school changed my attitudes, estimation of what I can do. ..I realized I was in a rut. I returned home grumpy. I took me a couple of days to come back...It was difficult to get back into harness. Fifteen years married and I was pleased to see I could function on my own. I was nervous of functioning independently. The wife does not understand and wants to carry on as before. I like to be out of the home environment, head above water, exciting things happening. When you are married as long as me it is too close. My wife does not understand. It is difficult for her to accept that I will not vanish immediately".

Comment

Again we see how OU study can open up a new world which becomes a source of great anxiety for those left at home. The personal insecurity which leads to a loss of independence can become a source of serious tension as well as creative change in a marriage.

Aging and learning

In another example we see how worry about one's capabilities may increase with age as well as change. Sam is about forty and married. He left school after failing O-level exams and found himself trapped in a boring job. His wife has three A-levels and is an important support. "The evenings in summer school were more difficult. I did attend some social things but I felt too old. ..My only disappointment in summer school was that cars were broken into. My wife dropped me off. I enjoyed the labs at first but I don't have brilliant eye sight. My partner was deaf in one ear. When I get one thing wrong, I always get two things wrong. I nearly got killed on the bus the first day. I'd like to pass but I've not done enough work. I couldn't see things in the lab, there was too much light in the room...When I came back from summer school with even more ground to make up, I didn't think I'd stick to it when I saw the size of the package that came" (in the post from the OU).

Comment

Sam gives a vivid description of the anxieties OU study can also open us up to - unfavourable comparison with a spouse, loss of capabilities through aging, sight and hearing and increased vulnerability symbolized by a car being broken into. The feelings can become so strong that we may become pre-disposed to an accident, as Sam felt about the bus.

It is not surprising that the interviewers strongly identified with the students, as I will now consider.

Impact of the interviews on us

In some interviews we appeared not to hear some of the worries students were expressing, possibly from a need to defend ourselves from the disturbing feelings. The trust that we had developed over the previous year proved essential to completing our analysis of the interviews. It is not easy to have your inhibitions pointed out.

For the students, the impact of starting study and approaching the uncertainties of summer school was often expressed in their voices which were quiet and unsure but, after summer school, strong and confident.

Looking at the transcripts we were also impressed by the interaction between the students and interviewers. For example, Sudipa, who interviewed Dave wrote - "I was struck by the mirroring between us. I think it likely that, for him, I was one on the list of people who he would not have met otherwise, like the punk girl. His reaction to me was some interest, excitement and to see if he could 'handle' me in the interview. In response, I was doing the same thing to him and the result, as far as the interview was concerned, was that I did not look beneath the surface he presented. Another reason I didn't was because I am used to being treated like a freak and don't react to it or notice it very much". A second colleague confirmed that- "Dave said important things about how he felt in such a matter of fact way that it seemed impossible to pick up on. His delivery was so sleek and smooth that questions rolled away".

One of the most striking examples of student impact on the interviewers was in the following example. We had been using 90 minute tapes but after the first interview with Alan in summer school the interviewer felt so overwhelmed that he used a 60 minute tape for the second. I will quote from more of Alan's transcript because it reflects more about personality structure, how earlier levels of development may be reflected by confusion in one's own identity and relationships. In this case the experience of summer school evidently made a considerable contribution to his development, as revealed in the interview after summer school.

Regression and development

Alan is in his mid twenties, married with one child. His wife is expecting a baby two months after summer school. He left schools after CSE exams, gained some O-levels at college and failed his first year of a national diploma course. His first interview was on his fifth day in summer school and the quality of it was very different from the others. The interviewer found it very difficult to ask questions. Alan seemed to fill all the space with fragmented comments which frequently contradicted each other - "I tend to learn better in the OU, things I read myself off my own back I tend to learn better. I won't limit my horizons too much but I won't expect too much. I don't want to waste my time getting a doctorate if I'm not going to get it....If I'm not studying until 1 AM my wife asks 'what's the matter with you, half hour behind are you?'....Summer school is a week away from home and a week away from studying. I am a bit worried about

my wife's pregnancy but I put it to one side. Summer school is an experience which I might regret or enjoy. It could be a waste of time better spent elsewhere, a general worry. The doctor said my wife was very ill. It could be toxemia and being away for a week is not very long. But it is only a week so I don't worry. If I did have responsibility then support for my wife would definitely be important...In summer school you can look up to tutors. They know exactly how to help you do it. To be a tutor they prefer you to have studied the course. If they have done it why can't I? I can almost put myself in competition with tutors. At technical college tutors throw information at you and you caught what you can. At the OU it is different. You are almost on a par with tutors. The only difference is they have passed their credits...In summer school if a student is struggling I tend to go over, if you can help him out, and help him out. I don't try to take the role of tutors when asked 'how do you do this?' Instead to saying I know but I'm not going to tell, I turn around and tell them or pretend that I don't know either. When at school I was going to be a teacher. It's the only job I'd seen being done. Then I got married and got a computer. I take my wife, even though she doesn't want to, I teach her about a computer. I think I'd like eventually to be a teacher"

At this point, after about one hour, the interviewer tried to end but Alan increased his flow of words to fill the space.

"The best thing about summer school is being in contact with so much truth, education. You can be very isolated sitting at home in that bedroom. It's sort of an abstract feeling that education is there. You go into the back bedroom, ok, education is very personal, very secluded...It's almost like on a hot, dry day in the middle of a car park, an empty car park. You feel the heat coming up and you're slogging along and you see a tap. You turn the tap on your head and it's so relieving, you know. It's the only way of describing it...You can actually feel education being injected, feel knowledge or fact, whatever. And it's not just facts, plain facts, it's the actual morale of studying"

Six months later, in February, Alan was interviewed at home, using a 60 rather than 90 minute tape. There is a very different quality to his voice which is more varied and less flat, more excited and laughing. There are also many more silences as he reflects on the interviewer's questions - "I've noticed over the Christmas period when we had no work to do I was edging to go to that spare bedroom to do some studying...I've had, sort of, withdrawal symptom almost. It

was like trying to give up smoking. Got uneasy, edgy. It was weird. Then I found I was sorting through all my units, just sorting them out...I take the units to work. At dinner time I get them out. I don't do any work. I just read through them and at night I go back over them and get the calculator out...When you look back at summer school, it's almost like it is separate to the course...but it's a door open from the course to summer school. You find in summer school there is no way out apart from back into the course. So there is a two way door there. But I think it's almost safer in the summer school, that feeling of safety, being looked after. In the course you can be in danger of catching agoraphobia, too open, too many unknowns. When you go to summer school, that's closed in. You sit there and feel comfortable. The summer school was like I really wasn't away, refreshing. One of the best holidays I've had. I thought I'd need a holiday after and took the course units to the parents, sat out in the garden, beautiful weather, sharing the course units with the goat".

Comment

The interview with Alan shows more details of how strongly students can experience contact with the OU and how much they may develop. We felt that Alan was more 'together' in himself as a result of summer school - open to listening, reflective and not contradicting himself. His reference to the family goat could be taken to be a humorous representation of himself taking in and digesting the academic part of the OU. After summer school Alan had more realistic perceptions about those he had earlier stereotyped, there was less idealization and denigration of tutors. Resolution of anxieties is an important consequence of direct contact between students and teachers.

Tutors in summer schools

Most of the tutors in summer school are part-time staff who also tutor the course during the year. A few staff are taken on from some relevant profession who do not tutor during the year and they may be particularly vulnerable to taking up roles which represent unconscious anxieties in a distance teaching environment, as shown in the following example.

Sue is a young single woman who has only tutored in summer school. She described the following experience - "I had found real problems, as you tend to on this sort of course, of the interaction with the male tutor in the pair. I had, he

got into some serious problems with some of the students but I let him dominate in some of the group sessions a bit and he had a blazing row with some student...But once that was over, and I knew it wasn't my fault, you know, and I could cope with problems as they emerged, doing sessions on my own, not worrying about being evaluated by someone who is an experienced tutor, plus the support of all the other teachers."

"We had, they'd been a really lively group. We'd had a really good time...they wanted to put their ideas forward but he treated them like conventional undergraduates. Then one of the students picked up some contentious point and it just went 'woompf', you know how things do. It is difficult to pull out of what is going on but suddenly it is out of hand. The student walked out- it was a blazing row that lasted about two minutes...instead of trying to calm things down the tutor was too far in and I was just standing there like a spare part not knowing what to do but generally trying to be nice and hoping things would work out that way".

"Just because a tutor has done it for years and years doesn't mean he was necessarily good...Even though he had a black badge on (students have coloured badges) the row sort of destroyed it. That was great. ..the student and I were able to get on great after that. I always had lots of support from students who handled it well after that...I don't think they were alienated by it...they pin-pointed the problem in the tutor. His behaviour changed a bit the next day. I was surprised he came back, in a way. He was much quieter. He didn't dominate them as much. He was a bit more aware, hadn't changed completely...we still clashed a bit but I think you always wonder who you are going to get paired with".

"I always get paired with the one that I reckon that I would least like to get paired with...The first night it is interesting to look at the students and try to pick out the ones you'd be getting and, I always look at the men, I think particularly, to see which are going to be trouble and I hope he will not end up in my group but they are always the least trouble in the end...Teaching this gender issue, you've got all this hassle about teaching with a man, right, I'm exhibiting the sort of 'role norm' that we want to project, you are very sensitized to male chauvinism".

"There were three women tutors this week, almost the same age, we all started this week. The men were here last week. There is this in-built advantage if

you've already done a week...then you are worried about getting to know the person as an individual...I started off this week feeling paranoid. I thought to myself just calm down, you'll not be undermined...then the students say why does he always contradict you, right, and then after we had a very difficult second group. My co-tutor went to the course director and blamed the problems onto me. I wasn't there...talking to other women this happens quite often as well. Then once you can externalize the problem and put it on to your co-tutor, then you can deal with it. It's not that you are inept, it's not that you are somehow inferior...but you have to do something about it as an equal".

"I don't know how sensitive they (the OU) are to the dynamics between tutors when they are actually thinking these things out...there's a lot of this sort of thing, women getting together and saying 'Oh God, we are getting paranoid'...the tutors have to sort of live it out. ..We have to be, more modest is too strong a word, the women have to be allowed either enough space to actually put forward these sorts of ideas and actually show them in action, contradict stereotypes. Some men I've taught with used to deliberately make their sexuality ambiguous to the students...it sort of lowered their status in a way. There was more equality between the male and female thing".

"The pressure is on women not to be too assertive because you get labeled as too aggressive.... It is threatening to be watching yourself all the time, to battle against someone who is supposed to be supporting you in a teaching role...Some students deal with the course on an academic level, especially discussing calmly and rationally, but it hasn't affected the way their feelings are or the way they think about it...".

Comment

The most striking insight of this woman tutor was that women are acting as a kind of container of a process, suffering through it but also learning more about relationships in institutions than students or tutors.

Sudipa, also wrote some interesting comments about this interview - "I noticed Miss S cancelling herself out, loss of identity in what looks like a strong position. I noticed her manipulativeness and desire for control. At the start of summer school she sought out the men she thought would be trouble makers and tried to form a bond with them. She wanted to 'stop badness and difficulty'. Her

underlying attitude about the start of summer school is 'how am I going to control this situation?' Not 'how am I going to enjoy this or get something out of this'. Beneath this attitude must be a sense of powerlessness (because why manipulate, why not confront or level with?) and a great degree of fear (because why control if there's not imagined threat?), a lack of trust in the situation and her colleagues and her students (because why not voice her fears and need of support if she trusts them?) , and a hidden hostility (by manipulating and controlling she refuses them the option of being an equal human being and treating her as an equal human being. The relationship is 'I-it', not 'I-thou')."

"Coupled with this desire to control is a missionary position on the course material. She feels she knows what the truth is so discussion and enquiry is closed anyway, and will use other means of evidence and discussion. The two examples of this which stick in my mind are firstly her setting herself up as 'the role model' she wants to project- i.e. she has to behave as a woman in front of the students in a way that supports the 'truth' she wants to convince them of, rather than as herself or as a tutor or facilitator of their learning. No wonder she finds the whole day stressful. She is being a martyr to the cause. The second example is the suggestion that male tutors act as if they might be gay to disconcert the students. Both these examples reflect her manipulative approach to the summer school situation."

"Underneath the 'mission' or 'crusade' may lie the myth that summer school has to make up for all that's missing in the rest of the OU students' experience of study. In this way, the 'crusade' is a myth which informs many OU tutors' attitude to summer school and leads to a frantic, frenetic intensity and anxiety as this is the only chance to feed these starving long-distance students. The tutor can see herself as the food, the sacrificial offering, shared in this communion. In Gestalt terms the energy generated by the tutor also has no outcome, no ending, so that the tutors never know if they have done a good job or not - another anxiety-provoking situation."

Summary

Beginnings and endings provide a transition point in which worries about change are accentuated and challenges for development most intense. OU summer schools are the one place where we may see how the behaviours of students and staff help make sense of a distance teaching institution. Summer

schools may do more than just compensate for the missing personal aspect of learning or give access to materials which cannot practically be sent out to students. Some of what is learned in summer schools is not, perhaps cannot, be specified in course materials even though it may have considerable effects on learning.

Some students would rather revise the academic work or catch up on it rather than attend summer schools. Although apprehensive about personal contact, many look forward to it to relieve the isolation they have felt working at home. Opportunities to attend tutorials in local study centres does not appear to meet the need for personal contact, focused as it is mostly on the academic work. But two differences are suggested about some men and women. Women express a worry about the summer school being so structured that no time is allowed for discussing any problems. Some men, in contrast, appear to worried about the lack of structure - of spontaneous and unsuspected emotional demands. Consequently, when men are interviewed about their experiences they may also attempt to structure the interview situation, controlling it and leaving little space for the interviewer to explore. Men may be less comfortable with process because of the institutions they work in. Women may be more comfortable with process and suspicious of structure, possibly because they expect to grow up with children - their institutions are inherently learning ones.

Also observable in some men is a tendency to polarize their expectations about summer school. For one student the OU was the idealized good protective father and the bad mother was a local technical college who didn't care sufficiently for his difficulties. Through his personal contact with other students and tutors, the institution became more like a good parental couple - critical, supportive and having a separate and creative potential. For another student the OU was cold and students old, searching for partners to replace those who had died. His part-time tutor at the local study centre was young and academically capable and as a result expected mainly intellectual outcomes for the OU. In summer school he was able to act out his competitiveness towards authority, represented by a tutor, and came off well in the eyes of two women students. In other words, he gained confidence in his assertiveness without fear of destructiveness in either direction. So his 'internal couple' became not only good but sexual and productive i.e. creation out of a polarity. Through summer schools one may explore the polarization between closeness and distance, which represents one reality of the OU, and make it available to consciousness, thinking and learning.

Teaching and Consultancy Centre Report No 68

A consultancy in summer schools

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The Open University

The **Teaching and Consultancy Centre** is part of the Open University's Institute of Educational Technology.

Its aims are:

1. **To help improve student learning** in the University by advising and assisting Faculties, Schools, Continuing Education, University Committees and groups, as appropriate. A chief concern is the accessibility and teaching effectiveness of course materials, to which the Centre contributes through its work on course teams: through research; course planning, policy making and working methods; critical reading of draft materials, and the evaluation of courses.

2. To maintain a knowledge base for the above activities by helping to research problems in the OU learning system and by recording experience in course teams and on committees, and also to encourage innovatory solutions and practices.

3. To provide consultancy and training, inside the OU and on a contract basis with outside organisations, based on the staff's wide experience in distance education and open learning. On this same basis, to chair course teams and write course materials, and to 'transform' materials produced by external contributors into high quality distance teaching material.

FOREWORD

An enquiry into relationships in summer schools, conducted through a role of process consultancy, addressed anxieties at the inter-group level - between students and staff in separate courses, between staff from different departments and/or physically separated in different locations and full-time from part-time. This study reveals how anxieties may affect staff and teacher-learner relationships, especially when focused through issues about gender, generation and age. When anxieties about authority and dependence are focused on an internal consultant further progress of such enquiries can become difficult.

A CONSULTANCY IN SUMMER SCHOOLS

The problem

In this project I set out to discuss with OU colleagues their experiences of summer school but discussion became impossible when some relationships were dominated by anxieties about my relationships with them. In writing up my experiences in two summer schools, I had three aims - 1. to relate the experiences to a theory which would help us understand causes of relationship problems and anticipate future ones 2. to share some of the sources of the theory I found useful and their implications for teaching and learning as well as staff training and 3. to link problems in relationships in a group with those in individual learning. It seems to me now that a fundamental problem, especially in distance education, is the transition from being a learner to being a teacher and how this affects the teacher-learner relationships. Under the intense pressures of OU summer schools students may experience some confusion and anxiety. Tutors and, even more, directors of courses will maintain a clear structure and firm authority to reassure students, possibly beyond that of ordinary management of the conditions necessary for work and learning. It is possible that education will be presented as something controlled, agreeable and predictable with neglect of beginnings which may be confusing, resisted and possibly frightening. To the extent that we may over-look the real in preference to the ideal, we may unwittingly replicate in our relationships some of the anxieties about working a 'machine-like' environment which any large institution may provoke i.e one which does not care and does not respond Part of my problem nine years ago was that I wanted to 'teach' my colleagues about a theory which I had not entirely internalized myself. Thus, I was seen as a 'student-teacher' who made some obvious mistakes e.g. not being clear about what I was teaching and, at one point, not being able to contain the anxieties in the situation. Colleagues were reasonably critical and yet the project has given us some data which may be helpful in identifying how institutional structure is important in individual learning, both at a distance and in group situations.

Beginnings

Before the summer of 1983 three courses had become a focus of concern for some OU staff and I was asked by a senior administrator to enquire into them to see what could be done to prevent or solve some of the problems. Now, nine years later I can share more details about what happened because none of the courses

now exist although the issues they raise are timeless. Also some staff who were involved have left the OU (resigned, retired or died), the senior administrator also retired soon after, a situation well known in consultancy. People about to leave an institution are often the most likely to call in a consultant to solve problems but they do not, consequently, have to deal with the problems consultancy may stir up.

In the first week of summer school I attended there were four courses and I give their years of presentation in brackets - T101 Technology Foundation course (1980-88), U221 Changing Experiences of Women (1983-91), U204 Third World Studies (1983-91) and SYS999 Systems course which is not dated because it provided the summer school experience for a number of separate courses. In the second week I attended there were just three courses, one from the earlier week (SYS999) and two others - D102 Social Science Foundation course (1982-90) and TAD 292 Art and the Environment (1976-85).

Concern was focused on possible tensions between women students who were in a majority (90%) in a new course, U221, and men students who were in a majority in T101. For the second week there was concern about the relationships in TAD 292 between tutors, students and the host institution. I thought it would be unhelpful to single a few courses out as problems when it might be important to understand all aspects of the environment they were in, including the interaction between all courses. Consequently, in December 1982 I recommended that the consultancy project focus on the needs of students and staff, the provision of counselling in summer schools and the need for other resources. By April 1983, my continued discussions with colleagues had helped identify a number of issues to focus on - beginning and ending a summer school, interaction (or the lack of it) between courses, different status and responsibilities between staff, the use of gender in excluding men students from course activities, group dynamics in staff and tutorial groups, personal counselling and learning in groups.

I was unprepared for and surprised by what happen to me in the first week of summer school. Looking back now it is clear that in crossing a number of boundaries I had accentuated some anxieties i.e. between administrators and academics, between counsellors and tutors or course directors, between the centre and the regions. Although I had many interesting conversations with tutors and students, the accumulated information appeared rather insignificant compared

to relationship difficulties. There were few problems between men and women students in the first week in comparison to my problems in U204 where I became seen as a very ambivalent figure, supportive by some and a threat by others. The fact that this was also a new course combined with the meanings any form of 'authority' might have from a third world perspective probably made the course director more protective of the course as did two other directors. For staff who identify with a third world course, someone who comes from outside may provoke anxieties about dependence or anger about being offered help which was not requested and not clear. Personalities may also have been important but they could not be explored or resolved at that time. I was discouraged from further contact with U204 as well as the counsellors who felt they had been drawn into difficulties which they saw as mine alone. In contrast, in the second week I was drawn into a counsellor role seen as constructive rather than destructive and I was able to talk to many more staff than in the first week. The main problem I encountered was between a TAD 292 tutor and two students. These problems may have been exacerbated by the timing. i.e. new courses more protective against outside interference and a course nearing the end of its life with no hope of being re-written because of the ambivalent feelings it had provoked in the past and the lack of understanding about its aims in the institution.

As I see it now, the dynamics which evolved touched on a fundamental and universal issue concerned with the formation and functions of boundaries. i.e. although boundaries separate and clarify what is different between people, mixed or ambivalent thought and feelings will lead to confusion about the boundaries (denial of separation and differences) as well as the reversal of positions on either side (the authority-dependence relationship is reversed). In the details below we will see these issues spelled out through what happened to me or my 'authority' in a consultancy role (polarized into good and bad) and what happened to two students when a tutor denied his own authority and responsibility for what happened in the situation. Feelings about being the third person in relation to a couple may mean, on a symbolic level, having to contain one's own depressive anxieties about being excluded from a creative relationship which is complete within itself. The only need for an 'authority' figure was to provide the conditions necessary for work and creativity i.e. maintaining clear boundaries about tasks, roles and relationships.

Anxieties are an important aspect of relationships and we may also think about the events described in this report in terms of using disagreements about

structure and process as a means of avoiding thinking about anxiety i.e. in arguing for either structure or process thoughts may be experienced as being the same thing as an action. In 'concrete thinking' there is no difference between physical and mental realities, to 'think' something leads to inhibiting guilt as if something had been done and is irreversible e.g. the idea of a 'process' becomes a rigid 'fact'.

Background

In 1978-79 an IET pilot project with consultants from the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (TIHR) opened up a debate about unconscious process within the OU and encouraged others to apply psychodynamic theory to understanding the conditions of work and the impact of distance education on staff as well as students. The first person to write about such enquiries was Pete Davey, one of the five members of the IET 'Tavistock steering group' which managed the boundary between the OU and TIHR. Unfortunately, Pete died soon after his work described below.

In 1982 Pete Davey evaluated a week of a summer school course and wrote a year later in Open House (June 1983) about some of his observations - "In more than one group there was tension between students who wanted to get on and do something and students who were not satisfied by the particular 'something' suggested. This could lead to quite an anxious stale-mate. Whichever faction prevailed, there were liable to be later regrets, either of too much haste or of too much time wasted at the beginning. Students tended to suppose that tutors were nearer omniscience and omnipotence than was the case - small comments or actions were given significance, and tutors were assumed to understand the groups dynamics and largely to control it".

Later in Open Line, a BBC publication now discontinued, (No 37, September 1983 p.11-12) Pete wrote - "I believe, then, that many emotional demands were made upon the tutors. They all appeared to cope with these adequately, but I am not sure how: if I were in that position I would feel the need to express some of the feelings that came up in me, and to talk through what was happening in my group in some safe retreat. This did not appear to happen in the tutor room...Several time I felt both students and staff were assuming that they all shared a common cause in education. It wasn't obvious to me what exactly this was, but students seemed to be expected by each other and by the OU to be

committed to going back to their schools and further it... At the end of the summer school nearly everyone seemed happy about the way it had gone and what they had achieved. Just as students' strong and mutually uncomfortable feelings at the start of the week can be attributed to the situation they found themselves in, so can the pleasanter feeling at the end".

Preparing for the summer schools consultancy

After two years of consultancy experience through five contracts with OU teams or individuals, in 1983 I entered my first contract at the inter-group level. This consultancy was initiated through informal discussions with the then director of the Summer Schools Office who was concerned with one summer school site. As it turned out the difficulties were different than expected and became focused on me in the summer school as well as in the regional office in follow-up discussions. All these experiences help reveal some of the anxieties endemic in a distance education environment, largely associated with separation of students and staff in the centre and regions.

In process consultancy one becomes caught up in the dynamics and these uncomfortable experiences are an important source of insight and understanding, as Pete Davey described. Taking this understanding to a broader audience within the OU also proved difficult.

The requirement to obtain approval from different individuals, groups and committees combined with follow-up discussions extended this project to over a year (December 1982 - January 1984). The OU has strict procedures for research involving students or staff and the Director of IET approved my request (December, 1982) on condition that I get approval from the Chairman of the Summer Schools Committee and the Regional Office in writing. Following this approval I then needed to get the acceptance of the two school directors, seven course directors and chairs of the respective course presentation teams. It was not practical to obtain approval from over one hundred tutors on the courses. One of the earliest written responses to my proposal stated that "the idea of surveying a whole school, especially one as complex and as potentially interactive as the 1983 UEA package, is well worth the trial. The provisos I have in mind are that (a) the survey should not perturb the already complicated scene - in particular the students' experience of it and that (b) your work should not make still trickier the

always-slightly-contentious problems of the 'what why and how' of summer school counselling".

Soon after a member of staff raised a concern about U221 with the regional office in a memo which I do not have so the concerns have to be inferred by the following two responses. The Summer Schools Office acknowledged "the question of counselling for the abnormal mix of courses" and "the nature of the material being discussed in the modules and the kind of group dynamics which might be generated from this material". A member of the regional office staff replied in a widely circulated memo "I think I can reassure you that we are not without considerable experience in this region of counselling needs which are believed to be 'apart from the usual academic and personal issues'...We have also, I can state, dealt sensitively with some aspects of feminist concern which have arisen because of interactions between some tutors and students on TAD292 and those engaged with module three (sexual divisions and society) within the D102 summer school programme". Soon after the Summer Schools office enquired if I had any thing to report about my project because "It might tie in with concern that has been expressed in TAD292 and U221 quarters that these two school lines may cause more stress than most, to the type of student who is vulnerable psychologically to the summer school experience".

In earlier memos shared with me, a staff tutor and senior counsellor wrote of their concern about TAD 292 which they felt lacked clear structure. They described in detail two students who they felt had been disturbed by the course - i.e. "psychotic episodes" and "depression" which required medical treatment. They suggested that "in groups which are intended to have personal development implications it is normal for the group to have a clear and explicit contract which covers such issues as: (a) the rights of participants in relation to self-disclosure and non-disclosure (b) the rights of participants about leaving the group and rejoining it (c) the right to ask for help from the group (d) the role of leadership in the group (e) the rights of individuals who wish to ask the group to change its activities. There were other complaints about the lack of structure in TAD 292 in addition to personal complaints from students or their spouses. We will see below how some of these concerns were borne out in the second week.

There is an understandable caution about mass media treatment of any problems, whether related to the ordinary stresses inherent in learning or

magnified by personal problems which people often express within some group or institutional context. A distance education environment may attract some people who are uncomfortable in groups or relationships who then may find it difficult to cope with a residential school situation. The new environment may also put people in touch with relationship difficulties which they may not have been aware of previously.

Just before the summer schools I circulated to all staff a one page memo outlining the opportunities I hoped to have for discussion with them in - 1. tutor debriefing sessions (reflecting on alternative interpretations about what was happening) 2. informal discussions 3. group discussions negotiated with tutors and/or counsellors. I also mentioned some of the issues which had been identified by staff in earlier discussions - "Beginning and ending a summer school, interaction (or the lack of it) between courses, differential status and responsibilities of staff, the issue of gender, group dynamics in staff or tutorial groups, isolated students and stress".

The first week

With this first phase of the project completed at the centre I attended the first week of summer school with the aim of talking with as many staff as possible. There were about sixty of them in four different courses and nearly four hundred students. Staff begin arriving on Friday prior to their first tutor briefing on Saturday morning and I had a chance to talk with a few. One tutor had completed a second week with U204 and felt that the second week had been much easier due to the increased confidence of two staff who had also stayed into the second week.

<u>Beginnings</u>

On Saturday morning I attended the U204 briefing and was introduced along with the three counsellors. The tutors were curious about my role. One member of central OU staff asked if I "helped groups teach" and his implicit criticism led another member of part-time staff to defend my presence, that "we need to know more about working in groups, perhaps he counsells the counsellors counselling". The T101 tutor briefing was uneventful but in SYS 999 the course director mentioned 'NET' and I turned to the tutor next to me to ask what it meant. The director noticed and said to me 'nominal group techniques' and asked if I was familiar with it. In response to my 'no' he said that he was

surprised since I had come as a person interested in groups! Later a part-time tutor said "I hope you do not expect summer school to reflect normal behaviour". I had been politely excluded from the U221 tutor briefing because of my gender. Although 10% of their students are men, the course did not appoint male tutors. However, through the week I found the U221 tutors quite open to talking with me and welcomed me in their tutorials. In these brief experiences of beginning, the part-time staff, who are by far in the majority in summer schools, appeared to be more supportive than some full-time staff who were overtly critical or suspicious of my presence. This may reflect ambivalent attitudes of academics towards counsellors in summer schools with whom I was associated. Later in the week a tutor told me that one director had described me as a "spy who does not have to be let in".

U221 and T101

As the week progressed so did my contacts with tutors in all of the courses. Increasingly I received invitations to join tutor groups and I joined up with one U221 tutor to conduct a discussion group. Some women tutors felt they had more problems with T101 tutors than students. Some men students in U221 felt under pressure from others in T101 to justify why they were in a Women's Studies course. One T101 tutor who described himself as sympathetic to feminism found it easier to talk to the older U221 tutors. In the first week of U221 he said that the few contacts between T101 and U221 had felt 'heavier' than now in the second week.

The 'ice-breaker' in the bar appeared initially to fulfil its more popular name, 'the ice maker'. The U221 students did not arrive until 10:15 and then readily mixed with the men from T101. Most students can be identified with their course because of the coded colour badges. The 'red' label U204 students appeared to be concentrated in the bar below. Later in the week a T101 student said they had been warned to keep away from U221 students but he had found them quite talkative. On the third day I arrange to conduct a discussion group with a U221 tutor on 'Technology and gender divisions in society' to include T101 students.

U204

On the second day I attended the first U204 debriefing. One tutor mentioned a student who seemed depressed which she found hard to handle. The student stared into space in lectures and in the tutorial said the course should be doing different things and be given a different name. The course director asked if a

counsellor should be involved and the tutor asked 'how does one arrange this?" There was no answer to this question or further discussion of the student. The director mentioned a man intending to drop out who wanted to discuss this with the tutors but they felt mystified as to what he might want. Later the academic assistant looked at me and said "I realize none of us has spoken directly to Bob". There was a brief pause and another said "perhaps he wants to eat". Since it was getting close to lunch time I said "There are some things I could say but there might be a more appropriate time later" (not so near to lunch).

On the third day I mentioned the U204 discussion about the depressed student to the counsellors who thought there was a problem making contact with tutors in all courses. "How do counsellors come to be seen as part of a team?" they wondered. Later, one of the counsellors told me about her experience in a U204 debriefing. She told them that I had been worried that they might not make proper use of the counsellors. (This failure to preserve confidentiality may have contributed to my later problems) A tutor asked who she was and said he was a "trained counsellor, the team can take care of our own problems". Another tutor said "counsellors do not have enough to do and are trying to find problems". Another tutor disagreed and said "there are problems which need to be discussed". The counsellor felt angry and hurt by these comments and thought she had caught anger which belonged to me, that U204 staff did not know what I was doing there and some expected me to write a report on their failings and send it to the centre. The next day I discussed with the U204 director what I was doing and he agreed that it might be useful to arrange a meeting with their tutors but "they might refuse to meet you". I said their feelings were an important source of information about the tensions within summer schools e.g. worrying about criticism if a problem could not be solved. I also suggested that directors needed to attend to the boundaries between the course and the summer school as well as those within the course. He thought it was very difficult to build up a sense of community within a week and that the other courses did not matter. In the evening I met with the U204 tutors and took about twenty minutes to explain what I was doing there. This is a summary - "When discussions started some months ago I proposed to explore with staff their experiences of summer schools. It seemed worthwhile to look at relationships within an entire summer school. If some students in a course are affected by events outside the course, this might be important to understand. This is the first time I have been given a space to talk with staff, other than informally. Summer school seems so busy that there is no time to reflect on the experience. Groups seem turned in on

themselves which could become a barrier to using resources such as counsellors and leave staff feeling isolated from each other. Ideas might develop better when exposed to a broader variety of situations". One tutor took extensive notes and another said he was sympathetic but thought I must be disappointed now trying to get anything from U204, half way through the week. Another said he realized that I had become involved with other courses and doing anything further with U204 might be difficult. The note-taker said "thank you very much, that has been useful". I realized then that the meeting had been abruptly ended and that neither he or the six other tutors were going to say anything further. I felt shut out and shut up. On the morning of the fifth day I found out how quickly rumours travel. The U221 director said she had heard of my difficulties in U204 and thought they had brought some of their course team difficulties to summer school. She doubted if providing a formal space to discuss experiences of summer school was needed. There was too much to do and there were enough informal opportunities for contact. Women were also more sensitive than men and better at bringing people in who might feel left out. I asked the U204 director for another opportunity to meet his tutors. Later one of the counsellors said that my presence may have caused all the courses to draw within themselves and deal with problems themselves that in earlier weeks had been referred to counsellors. The other counsellor disagreed with this. At lunch time I talked with the school director who wondered if, for the good of the entire school, my contact with counsellors and U204 should stop now. I said "I would regret the loss of an opportunity to tie things together, it might be important to know about staff who feel so threatened that they need to be protected". He said he would talk with the two groups separately. In the afternoon a U221 tutor listened sympathetically to my experiences and what I was trying to do. She said she didn't think it right that I should be sent out alone to do this kind of job. I was so grateful for this comment that I forgot to go to the T101 tutor debriefing. On the sixth day I put a memo on the wall describing my work to try to correct further misunderstandings. The U204 director said he was furious because students might read it and think there was some problem between staff. He was right to be critical. I was no longer able to contain the anxieties and needed to reassure myself with the memo that what I was doing was clear. But to remain clear one has to contain ambivalent feelings and this is expected of tutors in summer schools. He was right also that there was a problem between staff, focused on me, regarding the lack of time or space to explore the implications of dynamics in groups either in summer schools or elsewhere within the institution. Later I was told that some staff felt that "Research of this kind must never be allowed to be

done again". I also agree with this and made some suggestions regarding any future enquiry in my final draft report considered below.

On the last day I talked mostly with students. I reviewed these experiences in a report which I will consider after describing the second week.

The second week

However carefully one may organize an enquiry into relationships and describe aims, methods and applications in writing, the confusion which follows may reveal something about defenses against anxiety concerning learning something about one's self, others and the environment. Such is the power of unconscious anxieties about bringing anything together that I found I had been expected to turn up at a different week of the summer school even though the date had been clearly agreed. The school director wrote "I think I have to advise you to tread a little carefully in your second week...It would be a mistake to pretend that the first week did not produce a few disturbed ripples. I think this is largely because of the fact that you actually turned up a week later than expected! This rather nullified my hope that summer school staff in the preceding week would be as well briefed as could be possible".

The school director, wanting to avoid some of the problems encountered in the previous week, agreed with me a statement he would make at the reception meeting at 12:30 - "Robert, from IET, is here to explore with academic staff their experience of summer schools and take a fresh look at group learning mainly by mutual discussion with tutors and counsellors. He will write afterwards a paper for summer school staff". I was invited to two of the tutor briefings but excluded from the D102 briefing because they were only in their second year of summer school and wanted to get settled before any possible disruption. Although I had discussions with about two-thirds of the tutors in the three courses, my attention became focused on TAD292.

At the end of the first full day of activities the nine TAD292 tutors met for a de-briefing meeting. Charles was the fourth tutor to summarize his day. He introduced two students, Brian and Alison, who had arranged to attend the course together, who he had brought along because he believed students should be represented. He went on to say (summarized from my notes) "I do not believe in distinguishing tutors from students.... they are here to explain their project... It

has been very hot today and we are tired partly from dehydration. I have a lot of experience of dehydration from doing exercises and one has to be careful about salt and fluid balances. The OU ought to provide some liquid refreshment like squash on hot days".

I had to leave at this point and did not hear any more until I met some of the tutors in the evening. They said I had just missed a very difficult meeting. The students, Brian and Alison, had just walked out dramatically, very upset and angry. The tutors were very confused about what was happening and thought Brian had been aggressive and unreasonable because they, the tutors, had been hesitant to be committed to a project they might not have time for. The tutors wished I'd been there to mediate since their tutor, Charles, had not. The situation, which seemed deceptively simple, was to deteriorate over the next two days.

The next day, just after breakfast, two tutors introduced me to Brian and Alison who wanted me to attend their tutorial. I suggested it might be appropriate to ask their tutor but they responded "if he could introduce us to the tutor de-briefing, why can't we do the same?" I said that seemed consistent and I joined their tutorial. Charles said he expected me to participate, not just be an observer and suggested they break into working groups. An argument developed between Charles and the couple, Brian and Alison, who still wanted to discuss their project. The discussion became more and more confused until I intervened and summarized how I saw the situation. They all calmed down and reflected on what was happening.

The next day Brian and Alison came up to me and said "We feel Charles has rejected us so we might as well do our project alone and not with the group". I talked with Charles later who said they had demanded too much time and that Brian had been difficult. I said that the students wanted to make a fresh start, forget about the troubles and stay with their group. But Charles said "I would rather they go to another group. We have lost a day dealing with the two of them and a few are upset. I don't think it would be useful for them to remain. I spotted them as a problem from the first moment I saw them". Later one of Charles' students came up to me and said- "I have not met you formally but our group has been concerned about Brian and Alison. We offered to help them with the project yesterday but we met a blank wall. I think I am representing the feeling of the others who would be very disturbed if they left our group...Our tutor

encourages us to work independently so getting along with him is not so critical". By the next day the student couple appeared to be getting along in Charles' group.

Later, Charles suggested I write to some of the students after summer school for more views because he did not share my concern about what had happened. One student responded with some interesting information - "At the beginning of the week there was a second couple which broke up when the man went to another woman. These three were all, in fact, married to someone else left at home. Brian and Alison were single and had arranged to meet in summer school. Charles encouraged us to tackle and confront the University authorities on any issue as part of the interaction process we were studying...Most of us chose Charles' group because it was undirected and devoid of interference in a teaching sense. We were expected to develop creative ideas through participation, interplay with other adults and empathy in our relationships without imposing ideas on each other".

It is impossible to convey in this summary the intense emotions, the distress of the couple, the anxiety of the tutors and other staff outside the course who became involved and Charles' curious ambivalence. Was this situation due simply to the clash of personalities about authority or was there also something about what couples represent in an environment where teacher and students are usually separate? The idea that creativity is freed when inhibitions about confronting authority are removed could reflect anxiety about bringing together things which are different (as a couple) or in potential conflict. Charles' earlier reference to dehydration suggested that distance education was not a sustaining environment for him. Much later a counsellor wrote me about other students who had come back from Charles' course evidently disturbed by their experiences. She said there had never been any response from the team to her memos and telephone calls about these problems.

In summary, an incident in summer school began as an appeal that students and staff should be the same. This defence of 'uniformity' (not recognizing differences) failed and a couple became the trouble makers. The tutor put them into an impossible position of doing something in a project for everyone - a symbolic source of nourishment in the dehydrating environment of an institution. He helped create a situation where it became impossible for the students to fulfil this ideal so they turned out to represent something bad rather

than good. They were encouraged, unconsciously, to act out the role of insatiable and demanding infants who were unresponsive to the needs of the parent, the institution, for quiet and order. This last statement is not fact. It is one of a number of hypotheses which should be kept in mind in trying to understand a situation and consider what an appropriate response might be.

The regional office

The consultancy had also included my agreement to write, together with a woman counsellor from another region, a guide to help staff to refer students in difficulty to outside agencies. There was not much experience of this in the regions although many felt some procedure should be set up. After summer school my co-author and I went to the regional office and met with six colleagues, two of whom had also been at the summer school described above. The regional staff became quickly split about our "Referral Guide" (to resources outside), some rejecting it along with anything about group relations. Their criticisms became very personally focused on my co-author. We eventually left the meeting feeling like a very battered couple. We concluded that we had become a repository for persecutory anxieties some staff feel in the regions that were also focused through the summer school.

Follow up

I wrote up my notes and shared them with some colleagues for their comments. I restated my two aims - 1. to support OU summer school staff in their work, individually and in groups and 2. to explore the influences of the institution and group process on work tasks. One colleague complained that my first aim was not clear "what form should this support have taken?" and that they were misled "that observation only was intended". The inference here is that one should be very careful talking about problems and, preferably, not talk about them at all.

As agreed in the beginning I also wrote three draft reports about the project and discussed them with colleagues. In the first confidential nineteen page draft I attempted to make a link between a psychodynamic theory, problems in the summer schools and problems in learning. In focusing on 'splitting' between groups I failed to show how difficulties also contributed to learning and led to change. It was too easy to list some of the stereotyping between U221 and T101

e.g. neutered men or real men, castrating feminists or male chauvinists, caring women or men with a debt to feminists. It was also easy to describe how I was split into a persecutory observer and caring counsellor and how that resonated uncomfortably with the experiences of the real counsellors. It was a rather bleak view which was not even clearly expressed because because of my emphasis on a theory unfamiliar to everyone. I did write up some of these experiences in an (1985) article for the The Sociological Review - "Externalized anxieties in summer schools and what they reflect about institutional integration" but I did not identify the courses there. I wrote about the dream I had after my final confrontation with U204 - "That night I had a dream in which my mind had two parallel streams of thought which I struggled to put together but could not, even thought I felt that they were somehow related. The next morning I associated the dream with 'split brain' experiments and felt that my experience of summer schools had been as violent, that the projections, particularly from the leadership, had split me in two". I also felt better after the dream which had given me an image to represent and think about my experiences.

In my first draft I also quoted from a book by A.K Rice (1963), The Enterprise and its Environment, which I thought relevant to our experiences. e.g. a participant-observer affects the situation observed but "attempts to use these effects to enrich his perceptions of what is happening" (p. 4), "Our own feelings of pleasure and pain, anxiety and relief, excitement and sobriety, are frequently the only measures we have available to assess what is real and what is unreal in difficult situations" (p. 5), What appears as a simple organizational problem "may often be found to have underlying it deep-seated and largely unrecognized emotional conflicts - conflicts which, if brought into the open, would cause great distress and even destruction", A consultant will usually be regarded in two ways, with relief and hatred - relief at his being aware of and prepared to take up underlying difficulties "will be mixed with a fear that the insight will not be backed by sufficient practical skill, and the hatred with a knowledge that the hopes were forlorn" (p 6). The overall task of leadership is "to find an optimal balance between the parts so as to make possible their maximum contribution to primary task performance of the whole, but also simultaneously to distinguish between and integrate the different leader-follower patterns appropriate to different parts". (p. 15) In the report I also listed some of the difficulties of "learning by experience" but will consider this after looking at some staff comments. The second nine page draft eliminated references to the literature but introduced little new. The 'Summer Schools Counselling Advisory Group' minuted some

comments on this draft - "that personal experience endorse those described...that the University needed to acknowledge that a lot of summer school activity that was not strictly academic, but nevertheless significantly affected student performance". They commended the project to all Senior Counsellors.

Responses

The director of one course said - "the worry that you were a spy was not a fantasy. Summer schools are under threat from budget cuts. Directors are expected to ensure that courses make no trouble for the OU. We are expected to cope with and contain alone any problems. If I'd known how difficult this whole course situation was, I never would have joined it". She soon returned to another university from which she had been seconded to work at the OU. With reference to my role, a staff tutor wrote - "If summer school is a period of structured tension for tutors, the presence of an unlocated and 'ambiguous' person is (correctly, I think) seen as potentially disruptive". A lecturer wrote "somewhere the issue of power/authority and father's role haunts summer schools for tutors and students and directors... Some full time academic OU tutors are angry at 'father' for disturbing their lives in requiring two weeks in a total institution... Hence the hostility of some tutors no doubt".

In discussion with course directors I found that some had tried to facilitate my contact with their tutors and regretted the difficulties in doing this. At the time I had experienced this as being unwelcome or excluded and in such differently perceived experiences we may see one of the sources of unquestioned myths and stereotypes found in institutions.

One colleague shared very extensive comments with me about my ideas and the difficulty I had expressing them - "I don't think most of your readers will be happy with the notion of emotions that... don't belong to anyone in particular - its a very foreign idea to most of us and when you combine it with an ambiguous writing style it gives a strong impression that you are airing your chaos, rather than articulating a collective chaos. I must have absolute literary clarity before I can have much faith in your ability to describe chaos. I get the impression that the whole project was (and is) a bit of a nightmare for you, and you still have not recovered your own poise, or integrated the experience... I sympathise with that, but if that is true, why on earth are you trying to lay yourself on the Committee block so soon. It feels like sheer masochism and I can't see how it can do your

long-term programme any good. The uncomfortable issues of large groups can also be terrifyingly daemonic and people can only assimilate what they are ready for, and they will only assimilate what they have contracted to assimilate".

Finally the administrator who had originally expressed his concerns about summer school recommended my three page summary to the Residential Schools Committee suggesting that their interest in the implied suggestion "that a summer school week is a pressure-cooker paradigm of the University's inter-group relationships might lead to another investigation". Unfortunately, my summary was never discussed because of the pressure of other business. In my summary I wrote that - "My focus in this report on the difficult aspects of the project should not obscure the constructive contacts with many tutors and our mutual exploration of group processes in staff and tutorial groups...although we (the OU) have considerable experience and skill in working in groups, there appears to be little expectation of, and few avenues to a mutual 'pursuit of shared understanding'. Activities which may support such a climate of enquiry range from facilitating contact between tutors, to broadening and strengthening the role of counsellors in cooperation with tutors. Although counsellors are expected to participate in briefing and discussion sessions, to my surprise I found this was an expectation shared by few people. The explanations, it seems to me from my observation of the interrelationships of summer school staff, is that course directors, counsellors and school directors suffer the distain of others i.e if one is distant from teaching or responsible for the activity or welfare of others. Further investigations should be (a) initiated by the groups concerned e.g. a course team or regional office (b) conducted by a team of central and regional staff which includes a system analyst and a sociologist (c) be supported by an external consultant on group process. Such a person might be from outside; or internal if based in a region not involved in the enquiry, or in a separate central unit".

A psychodynamic perspective

I have found that a psychodynamic perspective organized into three levels of development is relatively simple to use but gives sufficient scope to account for the complexities of relationships in groups. The ideas of boundaries, containment and change can be seen as an expansion of our awareness of space, time and creation - both physical and mental aspects. In the following classification I give examples of particular aspects of learning (initially identified in the draft reports) after each of the three levels.

1. Boundaries. Maintaining boundaries rather than barriers to negotiate roles, tasks or joining a group. Not acting towards others as if they represented all hope or fear (stereotyping) e.g. one colleague asked "where are your fangs and dracula mask" when I arrived at summer school.
2. Containment. Maintaining continuity and following problems through, holding on to anxieties and not coming to premature conclusions Discriminating between the more important behaviours in a situation
3. Change. Making transitions from one topic to another, judging when some behaviour has gone too far on the basis of some values.

In the summer schools I had observed or experienced a number of difficulties in learning which I've summarized above. Their organization in three levels helps us consider what happens when learning seems regressive and capabilities are lost. In his book Experiences in Groups (1961, Tavistock) W.R. Bion describes three defenses in groups - 'dependency', 'fight/flight' and 'pairing'. Their function is to avoid thinking about anxiety. When forming boundaries is too difficult, a group may create an abolutely 'good' leader on which it may depend and, consequently, individuals may divest themselves of any responsibility for what happens outside. I think the institution failed Charles, in a way, because we are not well organized to learn from the difficult experiences in groups. When some internal structure (e.g. individual ego or team cohesion) is not strong enough to tolerate and contain ambivalent feelings, boundaries may become barriers (in contrast to 'disolving' in dependency) with all that is bad located 'outside', to fight with or flee from. Both dependency and fight/flight behaviour are expressions of mental process of splitting and projection so that 'whole' people become more like 'part-objects', either good or bad, not grey. Change, learning and creativity evolve along with the capacity to re-integrate what has been split off and the anxieties associated with this are even worse. Depressive anxieties concern awareness of destructiveness from within and only something which is more 'spiritual' (compared to the body-mind transition between the first two levels) such as a belief in one's own creative capacity and hope in some better future can lead one towards learning and growth rather than regression. At this higher level is the defense of pairing between, for example, two people not for the purpose of creativity but to prevent change. In psychoanalytic terms the symbolic sterile couple is the ultimate defense against anxieties about that which is separate, independent and sufficient in itself. i.e. what the student

couple may have represented to Charles or my relationships with counsellors represented to the 'total' but temporary institution of summer schools.

Summary

I think that the only person who came out of this experience feeling better was the senior administrator who suggested it. No longer was he alone feeling responsible but unable to do anything about the problems, as he saw them. Administrators often work at the inter-group level, facilitating relationships between groups. Academics more often work within groups and do not have to cope directly with managing others. But all have to work through unconscious anxieties about learning and change which are most intensely focused in summer schools and course teams.

Of the many difficulties in this consultancy, including my inexperience, defining and maintaining clear boundaries was very striking. Nine years later would such a consultancy encounter similar problems? Although we in the OU have acquired considerable experience of this within teams, this consultancy project suggests how difficult it may be to enquire about differences between groups, at the inter-group level. Learning and development is always opposed by largely unconscious process which deny boundaries (separation and differentiation) and contribute to confusion by reversing whatever is on either side of a boundary. Taking up the potentially ambiguous role of process consultancy within an institution can be a powerful lever to unearth the ambivalent feelings which are contained through learning and development.